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Survey finds deep shift in makeup of unions

By Doug Wong

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BY STEVEN GREENHOUSE

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A study has found that just one in 10 union members is in manufacturing, while women account for more than 45 percent of the unionized work force.

The study, by the Center for Economic Policy Research, a Washington-based group, found that union membership is far less blue-collar and factory-based than in labor's heyday, when the United Automobile Workers and the United Steelworkers dominated.

According to the study, "The Changing Face of Labor, 1983-2008," just 11 percent of union members work in manufacturing, down from nearly 30 percent in the 1980s.

Indeed, for the first time since the National Labor Relations Act was passed in 1935, the percentage of factory workers who are in unions, 11.4 percent, has fallen below the percentage of all workers who are in unions — 12.4 percent last year. That is down from 35 percent in the 1950s. The membership of the UAW has fallen to less than 500,000, from 1.5 million in 1979.

Many labor leaders argue that for unions to reverse their long-term decline, labor will need to win passage of federal legislation to make it easier to organize workers. And many labor leaders say that public-sector unions, like those representing teachers and municipal employees, which have grown rapidly in recent decades, should do more to back unionization efforts in the private sector.

The study found that white men represent just 38 percent of all union members and that women will come to represent more than half of all union members during the next decade.

About 48.9 percent of union members are in the public sector, up from 34 percent in 1983. About 61 percent of unionized women are in the public sector, compared to 38 percent for men.

Elizabeth Shuler, the AFL-CIO's new secretary-treasurer, said she found the study encouraging because of the increased female membership in unions. "It shows that the diversity initiatives we've been pushing have made a difference," she said. "Unions have been pushing hard to open their doors."

To help reverse the decline of union membership in the private sector, she called for enacting the Employee Free Choice Act, legislation that would make it easier to unionize. Business groups have denounced the bill, saying it would raise costs and make it harder for companies to make a profit and add more workers.

The study found that 38 percent of union members had a four-year college degree or more, up from 20 percent in 1983. Just under half of female union members (49.4 percent) have at least a four-year degree, compared with 27.7 percent for male union members.

The report, written by John Schmitt and Kris Warner, said that Hispanics represented 12.2 percent of the unionized work force, up from 5.8 percent in 1983. Immigrants represent 12.6 percent of union members, up from 8.4 percent in 1994.

Schmitt said globalization was making it harder to unionize factory workers because "globalization makes for a much more credible threat to say, 'We're going to shut down this plant if you organize.'" "

He saw a few bright spots for labor, particularly the Pacific states, where there has been moderate union growth.

"And there's been growth among Latino, Asian and immigrant workers _ so there is a little hope for the future," he said.

Blacks represent 13 percent of the unionized work force, which has remained relatively steady over the last quarter-century. During that time, the unionization rate for blacks has fallen steeply, to 15.5 percent, from 31.7 percent in 1983.

The typical union member is 45 years old, compared with 41 for the typical American worker. The age for both the typical union member and the typical worker is seven years older than a quarter-century ago.

According to the study, the most heavily unionized group was workers age 55 to 64 — 18.4 percent of them were in unions. The least unionized age group was 16- to 24-year-olds (5.7 percent were in unions.)

The percentage of men in unions has dropped sharply, to 14.5 percent in 2008, from 27.7 percent in 1983, while the percentage for women dropped more slowly, to 13 percent last year, from 18 percent in 1983. For the work force over all, the percentage of workers in unions dropped to 12.4 percent last year, from 20.1 percent in 1983.